Philosophy of Consciousness

Topic 1
What is Philosophy?
Chambers Dictionary

• In general usage ‘philosophy’ is defined as:
  • “the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge;
  • investigation or contemplation of the nature of being;
  • knowledge of the causes and laws of all things;
  • the principles underlying any sphere of knowledge;
  • reasoning;
  • a particular philosophical system;
  • calmness of temper, stoicism.”
In professional usage ‘philosophy’ is defined as: “rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind, about
• the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence),
• the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge),
• and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value).
• Each of the three elements in this list has a non-philosophical counterpart, from which it is distinguished by its systematic nature.”
Rationally Critical Thinking

• But what does it mean to think rationally and critically?
• Isn’t this also a philosophical question?
• How do we think rationally and critically about how to think rationally and critically?
• Or do we already start with an understanding of what it means to think rationally and critically that \textit{precedes} philosophy – i.e. an already accepted philosophical method, or means of approach, by means of which philosophical questions can be addressed?
• i.e. Rationality: “This is a feature of cognitive agents that they exhibit when they adopt beliefs on the basis of \textit{appropriate reasons}” [Oxford Companion to Philosophy].
Appropriate Reasons

• But what is an *appropriate* reason?
• Isn’t this also a philosophical question?
• “It has long been accepted that rational assessment requires *rigorous rules* for deciding whether a proposition should be believed. Formal logic and mathematics provide the clearest examples of such rules.” [Oxford Companion to Philosophy]
• **But:** “Following rules is not always required, since one task of rational assessment is to determine which rules should be followed in a particular situation. To insist that this decision must be made by following other rules can create an infinite regress that would make it impossible to arrive at rational results.” [Oxford Companion to Philosophy]
Calculative Thinking

• To think rationally, in the sense of following rules, is a form of calculation.

• Such rational calculation must start from some ground, i.e. a proposition or set of propositions that are not accepted on the basis of purely rational thinking.

• Examples of such grounding propositions or premises are:
  • Everything that exists, exists in the form of physical matter.
  • Everything that exists, exists as a consciousness.

• Rational thinking can calculate the logical consequences that follow from such premises. If these consequences result in a contradiction, and we agree that appropriate rules of logic have been applied, then we can conclude that the premise is false.

• However, this only provides us with the assurance that something we believe is not logically inconsistent with the evidence.
Evidence

• But what counts as evidence?
• For physical science, evidence is a special kind of observation that is objective, measureable and repeatable.
• If we only accept such evidence as evidence that something exists, then our rational critical thinking will lead us to believe that all that exists is physical matter.
• However, it is not rational critical thinking that has caused us to believe this – it is our decision to only accept a certain form of evidence.
• The reasons for such decisions no longer have strict logical necessity
  • E.g. we give weight to scientific evidence because science has been so successful in understanding the underlying structure of the world
  • But it does not follow from the success of physical science that the universe is physical in the sense that science envisages it
Thinking about Thinking

• Once we think at this level, i.e. once we think about thinking, it becomes evident that rational critical thinking, as a philosophical method, is not going to lead to any final answers concerning the ultimate questions of metaphysics, epistemology or ethics.

• Rather, such thinking, when correctly carried out, will only clarify the grounds that different philosophical positions entail – i.e. what I must assume to be the case when I hold a particular belief.

• If we come to philosophy expecting to find some illumination concerning the ultimate questions of existence, the rational method of contemporary philosophy is only going to assist us negatively, e.g.:
  • By indicating that something we believed is logically inconsistent with our other beliefs – and so should be discarded.
  • By indicating that something we believed logically entails another belief that we do not hold and perhaps would not wish to hold.
Philosophy and Wisdom

• In contrast to this analytic understanding of philosophy as rational critical thinking about certain kinds of questions, there is the older idea of philosophy as being concerned with wisdom.
• Here wisdom means more than working out the logical consequences and premises of different philosophical positions.
• Wisdom implies that we reach a certain illumination or understanding concerning the ultimate questions with which philosophy is concerned.
• This idea of wisdom is contained in the original Greek word for philosophy, *philosophia*, meaning love of wisdom.
Meditation and Contemplation

• However, if we are not to think rationally about philosophical questions, what are we to do? Think irrationally?
• Here we part company with the Anglo-American analytic approach to philosophy.
• It is not a question of thinking rationally or irrationally, it is a question of the possibility of moving beyond the framework of rational (and irrational) thought.
• In the tradition of Western European culture, such moving beyond the sphere of rational thought has been described in terms of contemplation or meditation.
• Instead of thinking about something, one, in an as yet unclear sense, becomes immersed in that which is being contemplated.
• In this way, that which is addressed is able to reveal itself as what it is, i.e. according to its own appropriate essence and not according to a pre-existing framework of thought.
Phenomenology

• Such a contemplative approach to philosophising is connected with the 20\textsuperscript{th} century development of phenomenology – particularly the investigations of the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger

• For Husserl, what we have called contemplation, became the method of the \textit{phenomenological reduction}.

• For Heidegger, all depended on becoming \textit{attuned} to the Being of being [What is Philosophy?, p.77]:
  
  • “\textit{Philosophia} is the expressly accomplished correspondence which speaks insofar as it considers the appeal of the Being of being. The correspondence listens to the voice of the appeal. What appeals to us as the voice of Being evokes our correspondence. “Correspondence” then means being determined by that which comes from the Being of being. ... Being as such determines speaking in such a way that language is attuned to the Being of being. Correspondence is necessary and is always attuned, and not just accidentally or occasionally. It is in an attunement.”
What is Consciousness?

• In terms of the Philosophy of Consciousness course, our aim is not to enter into a rational criticism of the various philosophical positions one can take concerning the nature of consciousness.
• Our aim is to take a phenomenological approach to the question of “What is consciousness?”
• This means we must first find a way in to the question – which at the same time means we must find a way in to philosophy itself.
• Given that we (you and I) are actually conscious now, in the moment of reading these words, it is not as if we have to look elsewhere in order to address this question.
• And yet our first impulse is to think about what it is to be conscious, is it not? To perhaps look in the memory to discover what one has thought before, or read, or been told, or unnoticeingly absorbed.
• But that is not the way in - consciousness is here already - to look in the memory is to fall back into rationality...
References

